DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 330 IR 004 286

AUTHOR Graves, Sherryl B.
TITLE Content Attended to in Evaluating Television's Credibility.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 5 Sep 76
GRANT OCD-90-C-247
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the American Psychological Association (Washington, D.C., September 5, 1976); For related documents, see IR 004 285-290

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Adults; Children; Commercial Television; Content Analysis; *Context Clues; Credibility; *Television Research

ABSTRACT

Determining what aspects of television entertainment program content influence a viewer in his decision about the real/pretend nature of that content was the purpose of this study, in which interviews were conducted with children, adolescents, and adults. Interview responses were coded in categories of content cues, with the coding of content attended to being more extensive for the children's responses. Examples of categories used include: program name, program type, production techniques, types of action, plot lines, and objects on the set. Findings show that younger children tend to utilize more specific and concrete aspects of television content in making evaluative decisions and that, with increasing age, there is a decreased use of specific content cues and an increased use of the more general. Further research is being conducted to assess if teaching content cue interpretation to children is sufficient to alter the impact, and/or to make children more critical consumers of television. (STS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED135330

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Content Attended to in Evaluating Television's Credibility

September 5, 1976

by

Sherryl Browne Graves

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sherryl Browne Graves
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

IR004286

CONTENT ATTENDED TO IN EVALUATING TELEVISION'S CREDIBILITY

Sherryl Browne Graves
New York University

Paper presented at the annual meeting
of the American Psychological Association

Washington, D.C.
September 5, 1976

The Wonderful World of Walt Disney. The Six Million Dollar Man. Kojak. Cannon. Adventure, science fiction, police work, detective drama. A child watching television this evening might see some of these programs. While the content would be different, there are similarities that cut across specific programs. What particular aspects of content would influence whether a child would evaluate the content as applicable to his or her life?

People evaluate content in different ways. One white woman told us:

> I don't know much about it, but it seems that all the black shows are all the same. It seems that they're showing all the black people in one way on almost all the shows, so maybe this is true.... I think the white people are true-to-life and the black people must be true-to-life. I don't know much about them, but all the shows show them and have them act the same way. But as far as the white people, I know they try to make them true-to-life so people can sympathize with them.

A black man's opinion about how black men are portrayed is different. He said:

> You sure hit a sore spot now. I think it's absolutely terrible. And one show in particular is Good Times, I think his portrayal is terrible. I think his portrayal is terrible. I think it's just a downgrade for the black man. It depicts him as not being overly ambitious. He comes on, he doesn't come on in a manly way, to me. He comes on sort of like a gorilla, and I think this is what white people expect black men to be, like gorillas.

ED 004286

There are hints in these responses that consistency in plot lines, membership in a category of programs, or particular actions of a character are important in how children and adults react to and evaluate entertainment programming.

One of our assumptions was that focusing on the specific aspects of television content would influence a child's evaluation of the applicability of that content to his or her life. In order to assess which parts of a program are used, a variety of questions were asked. For example:

1. What do you think is the most true-to-life program you have seen on TV? What about it is realistic? Why do you feel it is realistic?

2. Suppose a little child didn't know what to believe on TV. And this little child asked how s/he could tell when things were real on TV. What would you tell him/her?

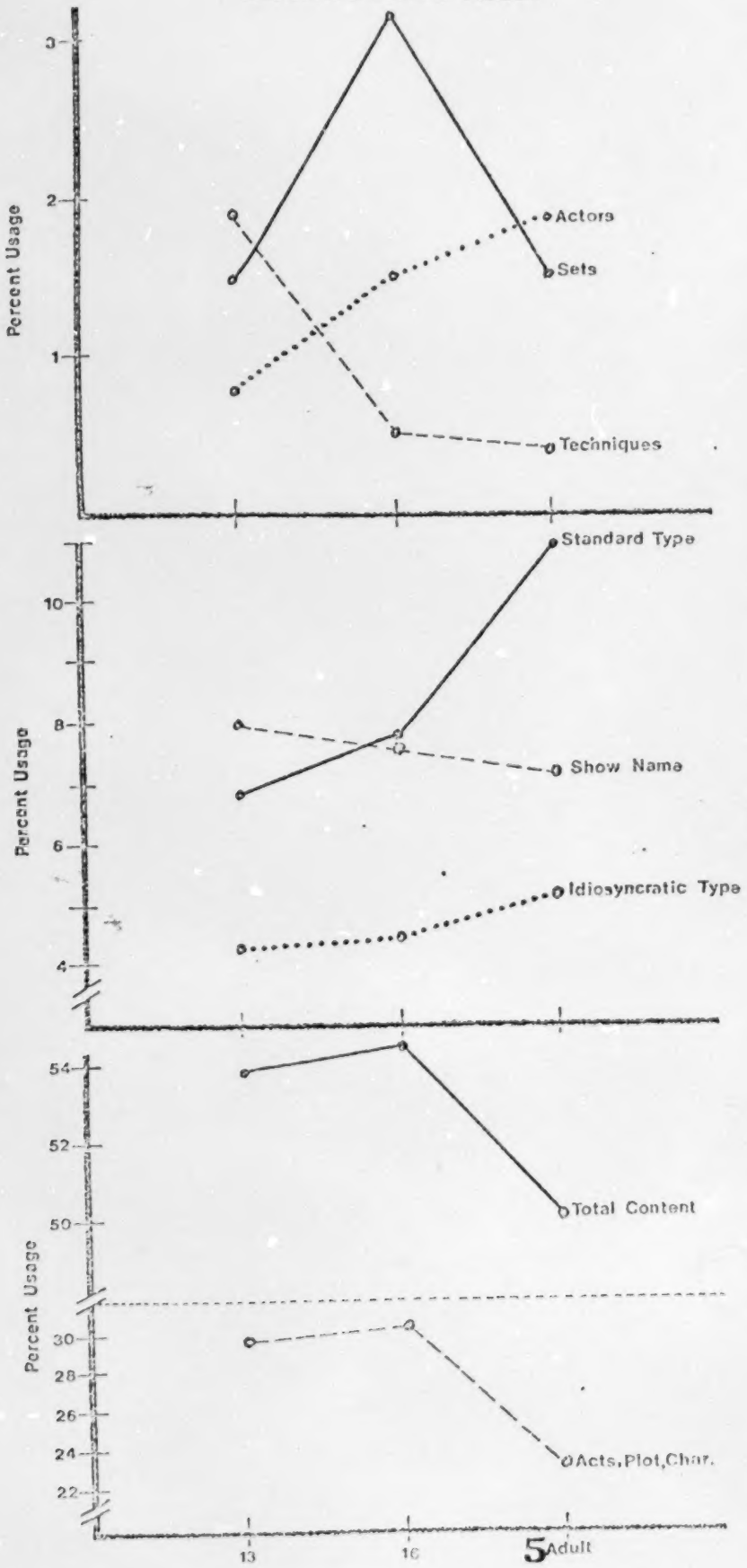
3. Now let's talk about Happy Days, which you said was one of your favorite programs. Is Happy Days real or pretend? What parts of it are real? What parts of it are pretend?

These questions and others were part of interviews that we conducted with the two sets of subjects I described a few minutes ago -- the children and the adolescents and adults.

From the various sets of codes developed for both interviews, we can isolate what the child, adolescent or adult is attending to when making the decision about real/pretend or true-to-life or worth knowing. What is it that is seen or heard, what cue is perceived in making the evaluation decision?

Let us now turn to the age trends for the use of content in evaluation of applicability of television. I will talk about the adult and child samples separately because of differences in the samples, the interviews, and coding systems. For the adolescent-adult interview, we have isolated seven categories of content attended to.

Insert Figure 1 about here


Content Decided About
Percent Usage
3
2
1
Actors
Sets
Techniques
Standard Type
10
8
6
4
Show Name
Idiosyncratic Type
54
52
50
30
28
26
24
22
Total Content
Acts, Plot, Char.
13
16
Adult

Adults and adolescents generally determine applicability using program cues in a similar way and to a similar extent. Adolescents use program cues for about 54% of the responses we coded, while adults use them for about 50% of the responses. When we looked at the relative use of the various program cues and compared the use of the cues among thirteen-year-olds, sixteen-year-olds, and adults, it was quite similar. The most frequently mentioned cues are actions, plot lines, and characterizations (APC). This combined category accounts for between 22% and 30% of all codable statements. Here is an example of the use of this cue from a sixteen-year-old black male discussing how Puerto Rican women on television are portrayed:

> I think a lot of that is fake. Like the way they are all getting beat up and this and that, you know. They are always swearing and yelling and having kids and all that. I think a lot, I think most of that is all fake.

The two next most frequent types of cues for adults were standard program type, accounting for 11% of all codable statements, and specific program names, accounting for 7% of all coded responses. For thirteen-year-olds and sixteen-year-olds, however, reference to specific programs and use of standard program type were tied for second place, each accounting for between 7% and 8% of all codable statements. Let me give you an example of how these categories are used.

> One sixteen-year-old girl told us that doctor shows are "interesting because I know that the terms that they use and the things that they say are all true, you know, they check with doctors first. And I always get a lot of interesting facts from shows like that, you know, things that are true and stuff."
>
> She apparently uses program type as a guide to truth, as well as her understanding that scripts are checked by doctors prior to broadcasting.

The fourth most frequent type of cue was idiosyncratic program type. The other three types of cues were used less frequently, never accounting for more than about 3% of all coded responses. As you can see, there are some fluctuations with age in the use of these last three cues, but the overall percent usage remains quite small.

The same data suggest that APC decreases in use with an increase in age (30% for thirteen-year-olds; 22% for adults), while standard program type increases in use with increasing age (7% for thirteen-year-olds; 11% for adults).

To test these possible trends, three-way analyses of variance were performed with age, ethnicity, and average credibility as independent variables and each of the previously mentioned content categories as dependent measures. Sex as an independent variable was not included in these analyses because preliminary examination of the data for group differences indicated that sex differences did not appear in the data or were very small. The only significant age trend that emerged was for standard program type ($F = 3.99$; $df = 2$; $p \leq .05$). The Newman-Keuls test was used for post hoc comparisons of the group means to determine where the significant differences are. These tests were performed with $df = 59$ and $p \leq .05$. The results show that adults use standard program type significantly more than adolescents, who do not differ significantly from each other.

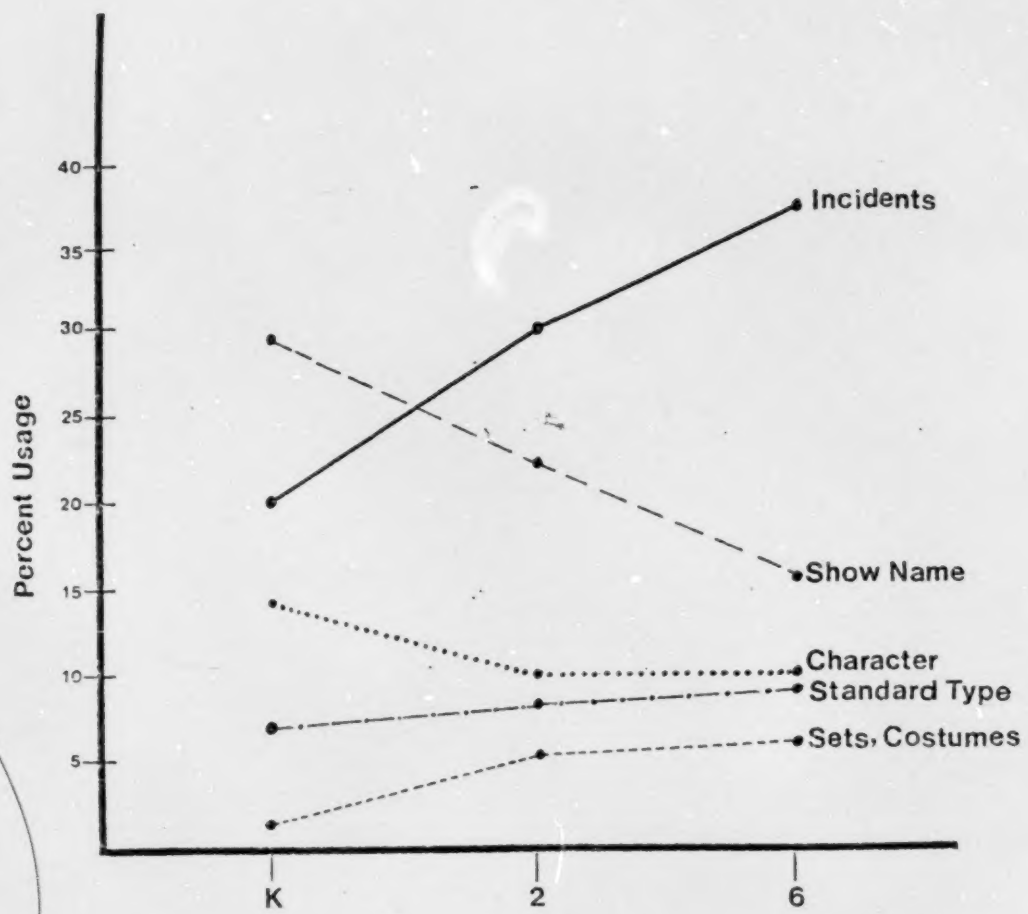
Next we investigated ethnic trends in the average percent usage of the content cues. Subjects in all three ethnic groups used the combined APC category the most (25% for blacks; 27% for whites; 30% for Puerto Ricans). APC was followed by standard program type and specific program name for all three groups. Standard program type accounts for 10% of whites' codable statements and 7% for the other two ethnic groups. Specific program name is used between 7-8% for all three groups. Three-way analyses of variance were performed with age, ethnicity, and average credibility as independent variables and the content categories as dependent measures to test these trends. However, no significant ethnicity differences were found.

For the adult sample it is clear that adolescents and adults use content cues in similar amounts and in similar ways. The one exception is standard program type, which is used differently by adults than by adolescents in making decisions about the reality of television content. Ethnic differences do not appear to be important in the use of content cues.

For the children, our coding of content attended to was somewhat more extensive, with fourteen rather than seven categories. We did this first because the nature of the television programs that make up a large portion of children's viewing is different from adult television and second because children tend to focus more on the specific aspects of a program when making real/pretend decisions. These facts give rise to the need for more detailed categories, like differentiation of incidents from plot lines.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Content Decided About



The content categories for the children can be divided into seven types:

1. Three codes for references to characters -- including references to the fact that live actors are real or cartoon characters are pretend, references to monsters of various sorts, and references to all other characters;

2. Two codes for references to objects on a set and to props, sets, and costumes;

3. Four codes for actions -- one for isolated or generic types of incidents, one for plot lines, one for human actors doing clearly inhuman things, and one for nonhuman characters doing clearly inhuman things, and one for nonhuman characters doing clearly human things;

4. One code for production techniques;

5. One code for specific program names which was further broken down into the standard program type within which the specific program fits;

6. Two codes for idiosyncratic and standard program types, with the standard types further broken down into the usual adult categorization scheme; and

7. Two codes for entertainment programming in general and all television programming.

In preliminary analyses of data from the child interview sample, we found the following trends. Our measures are the percent usage of a category for all content mentioned, rather than for cues and processes combined as we did with the adolescents and adults. Among kindergarteners the most frequently used category among the content categories is specific program name, representing about 30% of all content statements for kindergarteners. Incidents, or reference to specific plot events, is next in frequency for the youngest group (20%). The next two categories, characters and entertainment and all television programming, were used about 15% of the time. All other categories were used less than 10% of the time by kindergarteners.

Among second and sixth graders we found a different pattern. For both groups, incidents is used most often, followed by specific program names. Incidents accounts for 30% of all content statements for second graders and about 38% for sixth graders. Specific program names, on the other hand, account for 22% of second grade content statements and 16% of sixth grade content statements.

When we examined these same data for age trends from kindergarten to sixth grade, we found significant age differences for the use of incidents ($F = 5.58$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .01$). From kindergarten to sixth grade use increased from 20% to 30% to 38% of all content.

Age differences are also suggested from preliminary analyses for actors are real people ($F = 3.02$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .10$), specific program names ($F = 4.66$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .05$), and the combined category of entertainment television/ television-in-general ($F = 2.88$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .10$). For all of these categories use of the cue decreased as children got older.

Additional developmental trends were tested for the subcategories of Program Name and Program Type. Two-way analyses of variance were performed with age and changer-nonchanger status as the independent variables and the subcategories of Program Name and Program Type as the dependent variables. There was a significant age difference for references to specific cartoons ($F = 9.22$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .001$), with use decreasing with age, and a tendency toward significance for the dramas as a Program Type ($F = 2.48$; $df = 2, 41$; $p \leq .10$) with use increasing with age.

The results show that kindergarteners use actors as real people, specific program names and entertainment television/television-in-general more often than do second graders. Second graders use these same cues more often than do sixth graders. In the case of Incidents the pattern is reversed, with kindergarteners using this category less than either second or sixth graders. None of the other content cues produced significant age differences. However, within the categories of Program Name and Program Type two subcategories are used significantly differently by the three age groups. Cartoons within program name are used much more frequently by kindergarteners than by second and sixth graders, and dramas as a program type were used more by sixth graders than by second graders and kindergarteners. In general it seems that younger children utilize more specific and concrete aspects of television content in making evaluation decisions. This result is not surprising in light of our knowledge of the cognitive differences between five-year-olds, eight-year-olds, and twelve-year-olds.

Given the results from the two sets of interviews, is there any evidence of developmental trends in content usage in evaluation of television's credibility from kindergarten to adulthood? While there are differences in both the format and coding of the interviews some suggestive trends do emerge. With increasing age and with the assumed lessening of television's influence, there is a decrease in the use of more specific content cues like actors, program names. Also there appears to be a tendency to increase references to incidents or plot lines with increasing age. Finally, although there were no significant age trends for the use of standard program type for the child sample, the pattern of the means is consistent with the distribution of means for the adolescent and adult sample. That is, there appears to be a tendency

for children and adolescents to increase their use of this cue. But adults clearly use it more often than do children or adolescents.

The implication of these age trends in content attended to for our intervention efforts are twofold. First, there is a need to encourage children to utilize those cues which are most effective in making real/pretend decisions. Further, there is a need for children not only to utilize the important cues, but to use them accurately. For example, a child could use the program type of cartoon to decide that a specific show was pretend. But the reason could be because the child knew that cartoons were made up or the reason could be that the people tend to look green. In the former case the content category was used correctly in making a decision, while in the latter case it was not.

While it is clear that these content cues can be taught to children and the accuracy of their use increased, it is not certain that content cues are sufficient to alter the impact of television or to encourage and sustain more active evaluation of television. In the coming year we will learn if content cues are influential in making children more critical consumers of television.